

# Back to the Future

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**Reading:** *“The Pasha of Buda and the Edit of Torda: Transylvanian Unitarian/ Islamic Ottoman Cultural Enmeshment and the Development of Religious Tolerance,”*  
Susan Ritchie

*When Sultan Suleyman of the Ottoman Empire first learned of the birth of John Sigismund, the son of the King of Hungary, he felt it to be such a fortuitous event that he sent an equerry to stand in the corner of Queen Isabella’s room merely to witness her nursing the infant. Sigismund’s father, John Zapolya . . . had died just two weeks after his son’s birth in July 1540. On his deathbed, he had given instructions that his son be named heir to his titles, a violation of a previous agreement that promised Hungary after John’s death to Ferdinand, brother of the Hapsburg Emperor Charles. When it became clear that John’s successors had no intention of allowing Hungary to become part of the Hapsburg Empire, Ferdinand responded by laying siege to Buda. In 1541, with Queen Isabella’s forces nearing collapse, Sultan Suleyman appeared in Buda with a large army, successfully repulsing Ferdinand. Suleyman took direct control of the capitol, Buda, and much of lower Hungary but allowed Isabella and her infant son to rule Transylvania independently, under the ultimate suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. After some years of political contrivance and redefinition, Transylvania developed a new identity as a border state. An odd slice of semi-independence between areas controlled by the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans, Transylvania eventually became one of the safest places in Europe for the development of progressive Protestantism. In 1568, the now grown-up King and newly minted Unitarian, John Sigismund, issued the Edict of Torda, a document which historians have claimed as the first expression of the European policy of expansive religious toleration.*

## Sermon:

America is a great country. It’s far from perfect, but I count myself truly fortunate to have been born a citizen. I was also fortunate to have spent the first 18 years of my life, as an American Unitarian Universalist, living in Europe. That experience has given me a unique perspective on my own nation.

Two defining characteristics of the American ethos are a future focus and an inventive spirit. Americans are always pursuing the next new thing, whether it be a technological innovation or a recreated self. These two qualities have served our nation well, but – like all strengths – each has a shadow side. The downside of being future focused is that Americans often lack historical perspective; we don’t see, and sometimes don’t want to see, how the past is shaping the present. Our obsession with newness often leads us to dismiss the past. We do these things at our peril.

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I want to talk with you this morning about the past – our uniquely Unitarian past – and how that has shaped the present. More importantly, I want to talk with you about how our past, as a religious movement, might point the way into the future for our entire world.

Like most of you, I suspect, the congregation that I serve has a Partner Church. Our congregation's Partner Church in Varfalva, Transylvania was built as a Roman Catholic church in 1320, almost 700 years ago. The congregation embraced Unitarianism in 1613 and they have been worshiping in the same building for almost 400 years.

Imagine that . . . the Spanish settled Florida 1565, the French settled Canada in 1604, and English established a colony in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. By the time the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, the Unitarians in Varfalva had been worshiping together for seven years. The Pilgrims came to America seeking religious freedom, while the Unitarians of eastern Europe had already enjoyed that freedom for over a half a century.

And they enjoyed that freedom, in part, because of the visionary leadership of Unitarian King John Sigismund; but, they enjoyed that freedom because a benevolent power protected them from reactionary religious forces that would have stamped out the Unitarian heresy within Christianity if they could have. That benevolent protector was the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther accidentally launched the Protestant Reformation in Europe. As European Christianity split apart into numerous denominations, our religious forbears represented the most progressive theological wing of that reform movement. The ideas they championed were not entirely new. The theological concepts at the core of Unitarianism had emerged within Christianity earlier, but had been repressed as heresies by the Catholic church; ideas such as the oneness of God, the humanity of Jesus, and universal salvation. Even among the reformers of Christianity, these ideas were too liberal, and early Unitarians were persecuted. Many, threatened with death for their ideas by both the Catholics and Lutheran/Calvinist reformers, fled to the safest part of Europe that they could find. And that small corner of Europe was Transylvania.

As Susan Ritchie made clear in the reading that we heard earlier, Transylvania was a safe haven because the Muslim Ottoman Turks extended their protection over the kingdom and created the conditions under which Unitarianism could emerge, free from persecution. The Ottomans did this for two reasons. First, the theology of the Unitarians, emphasizing God as One and Jesus as an anointed religious teacher, was more consistent with Islam than the traditional Christian view of Jesus as God. Second, it was in the Ottomans interest to foster religious discord within Christian Europe, as this weakened the forces that might otherwise try to drive the Ottomans out of Europe.

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You see, 450 years ago, Christianity was decidedly intolerant of religious diversity, as evidenced by the Catholic Inquisition that drove Jews and Muslims out of Spain and a 100 years of wars across the European continent that pitted Protestant and Catholic kingdoms against each other for dominance. Christianity was at war with itself and that war tore Europe apart and claimed the lives of untold thousands of innocent people. Extremist religious forces, trying to impose their views on other people, waged brutal campaigns to stamp out dissent and seize power over vast swaths of territory. As Unitarians, we are the direct beneficiaries of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths. Without the protection of the Ottoman Turks, our faith might never have had the chance to establish a foothold in Europe and our liberal religious views might never have survived to help shape contemporary culture.

Ottoman religious tolerance was actually characteristic of Islam 500 years ago. The Qu'ran prohibits coercion in religion. All the early Muslim caliphates and empires offered protection to non-Muslim monotheists, like Jews, Christians, and Unitarians. For Muslims, so long as a person's faith was rooted in the Bible or embraced the Oneness of God, that person's religious views were understood as complementary to Islam.

In fact, there is ample evidence that the Muslims of the Ottoman empire did more than just tolerate Unitarian views, Susan Ritchie documents that "some of the early Unitarians in Transylvania safely published some of their more radical literature in the heart of the Ottoman Empire and then had it conveyed to their homeland." We know that Ibrahim Muteferrika, a young Unitarian raised in Kolozsvár, emigrated to Turkey where he both converted to Islam and established the first modern printing press in a Muslim land. The printing press, developed in Europe, was a gift to the Muslim east by the hands of a Unitarian.

This tolerance in religion practiced by the Ottomans, greatly impacted our own faith. We remember King John Sigismund as the only Unitarian king in history, but we celebrate him for issuing the ACT OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE in 1568, in which he stipulated that, in his kingdom, "preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them . . . but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching."

For many years, American Unitarians have celebrated this historic act of tolerance, imagining that it was the unique insight of a handful of liberal reformers within Christianity. However, over the past twenty years, in large part because of our Partner Church program that connected American Unitarian Universalists with our Unitarian cousins in Transylvania, scholars have come to understand that the genesis of this idea is more complicated than we had imagined.

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Susan Ritchie, in essay from which I read earlier, relates the following story: ‘On August 24, 1548, the Sultan’s representative in Buda was requested by local authorities . . . to take action against the Hungarian Protestant pastor there . . . the Catholic authorities in Tolna, offended by Pastor Szigeti’s unapologetic and public advocacy of reform ideas, asked that he either be killed or driven from the city for heresy. The Chief Intendent of the Pasha of Buda not only communicated to the authorities in Tolna that the Pasha denied their request, he also issued an edict of toleration which states in part “preachers of the faith invented by Luther shall be allowed to preach the gospel everywhere to everybody, whoever wants to hear, freely and without fear, and that all . . . should be able to listen to and receive the word of God without any danger. Because – he said – this is the true Christian faith and religion.”’

Twenty years before King John Sigismund issued his historic Edict of Torda granting religious freedom within his Unitarian kingdom, the Muslim ruler of Hungary had done precisely the same thing, refusing to allow the extremist forces within Christianity to stamp out dissenting views. The Muslims may well have planted the seeds of tolerance that have since grown into the freedom of religious conscience and the separation of church and state that we take for granted today.

But why should this matter to us today? I’ll tell you why. For the past decade, the western world has been focused on Islam more closely than at any time in the past 300 years. Many Americans and Europeans today will tell you that Islam is at war with the west. They talk about a clash of civilizations and an epic struggle between two competing religious and cultural visions for humanity. I submit to you that there is, indeed, a war being waged today; but it is a war in which Islam is pitted against itself. It is a war that is tearing the Muslim world apart and claiming the lives of untold thousands of innocent people. Extremist religious forces are trying to impose their views on other people and waging a brutal campaign to stamp out dissent and seize power over vast swaths of territory. Over the past decade, Muslim extremists have killed far more Muslims than they have westerners.

On 5 March 2009, the Pakistani Taliban bombed the shrine of 17th century Sufi poet Rehman Baba in Peshawar. Rehman Baba is considered a symbol of peace and tolerance because his writing emphasized the love of God and respect for neighbors. The shrine was attacked “because it was open to women.”

On 1 July 2010, the shrine to Sufi mystic Ali bin Usman al-Hajveri, revered as Data Ganj Baksh, or the Giver of Treasures, was bombed for the same reason.

On 7 October 2010, Muslim extremists bombed a third Sufi shrine in Karachi, dedicated to Abdullah Shah Ghazi.

Sufis are the largest and most progressive minority group within Islam. They are mystics focused on the radical love and oneness of God that is accessible to all people. Sound familiar? They embrace gender equality and interfaith dialogue. Sound familiar? They are the most dangerous Muslims in the eyes of Wahabbi fundamentalists like the late Osama bin Laden and his Taliban allies.

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And they are precisely the Muslims who are our natural allies in the struggle to promote freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion. They are our partners in the struggle against the rising tide of Islamic extremism around the world, and yet most Americans are ignorant about Islam and labor under the false belief that Islam is monolithic and that all Muslims believe exactly the same thing. Sadly, too many Americans cannot recognize a Muslim friend when they stretch their hands out to us in partnership.

The controversy over the construction of an Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan, and ferocious opposition to it on the part of so many Americans, is counterproductive to our long-term goals as a society and civilization. Imam Feisal Abdul Rahman, the leader of the effort to construct the Islamic Center, is one of the most respected Sufi leaders in America today. He is precisely the sort of progressive Muslim leader that we should be supporting. Instead, while the Taliban is assaulting Sufis in Pakistan, we are attacking them here in America.

We would do well to take a page from our own Unitarian history and recognize that, as a matter of enlightened self-interest, we should be supporting and giving shelter to the progressive thinkers in Islam today, just as the Ottoman Turks gave shelter to our religious ancestors when they needed it most.

As Unitarians, we are the direct beneficiaries of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths. Today, Unitarian congregations around the globe are trying to establish a liberal religious voice in countries that are beset by Muslim/Christian conflict.

Muslim communities in the Philippines have been infected by radical Islam and the resulting conflict has claimed countless lives. Our partner churches in the Philippines offer an alternative religious vision that sees the possibility of peace across the divide between different religions.

The third largest population of Muslims in the world lives in India, and periodically the historic animosity between Hinduism and Islam percolates up with deadly consequences. The Unitarians in India, and their progressive religious partners, offer a religious voice to bridge the divide in that conflict.

The sometimes lethal religious divide between Christians and Muslims in Africa runs right through Nigeria. Our Unitarian church in Lagos represents a beacon of hope in a country where religious violence threatens the very unity of Nigeria.

In Europe today, extremist voices decry the presence of Muslims on that continent and speak of an insidious invasion by immigration. They have forgotten that while Europeans were savaging one another over orthodoxy in Christianity 500 years ago, it was the Muslims of Europe that modeled peaceful coexistence and religious tolerance on that continent.

If we can recapture the truth and wisdom of the past, then maybe we will find in that the strength and means to shape a future based on mutual respect between religions around the world.

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Our Partner Church Council, and the relationships it forges between our liberal churches across the world, is doing important work. For Americans, our Partner Churches both connect us to our historic past and point us toward a future that might yet be. For our international partners in churches around the world, the Partner Church Council offers support and encouragement for the sometimes different and dangerous work of preaching freedom, reason, and tolerance in religion in your home countries. We need one another to advance the cause of our shared faith.

I believe that by looking back to our own religious past, we can discover a road map for the future. If we would build a nobler world for the children of tomorrow, then we have work to do today. The good news is that we are just the people to do it. Informed by the wisdom of the past and inspired by the vision of a shared future, let us be about the important work of forging partnerships – not just within our own international movement – but with our progressive religious neighbors of all faiths in our communities that together we might build a better, brighter, safer world for all.

So may it ever be.